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A HINT FROM THE NEWSPAPER OFFICE¹

Some of the problems involved in the teaching of English composition have now been solved; some are still unsolved. I was reminded of one of the former by an editorial article that appeared recently in a Chicago paper. The editor, commenting on Professor Lounsbury's views on involuntary composition, gravely rebuked the teachers of English in both high schools and colleges for adhering to the old abstract themes, "War," "Peace," "Virtue," and the like. It is high time, he said, that these worn-out subjects give way to something more live, concrete, and interesting. Why should not topics be drawn from the student's experiences and occupations? Let him write on something that he has observed with his own eyes, heard with his own ears, made with his own hands; and so on, and so on.

Well, here was an instance where the unfortunate editor—who could not, after all, be expected to know everything—had unwittingly put his foot in it. If there is one thing more than another that has marked the teaching of composition during the past twenty years, it is the substitution of the concrete for the abstract. In the search for live and interesting topics, the whole field of sense-perception has been ransacked. Textbooks on composition are simply bursting with concrete material. In fact the movement has gone to such an extreme that there are now signs of a counter-revolution. That particular problem, then, may be said to have been solved, with the encouraging result that courses in composition have become, to put it mildly, much less irksome to both pupil and teacher than they were formerly.

But there are other problems that are yet far from a solution. Of these, one of the most difficult is the problem of theme-correction. How can the teacher read and criticize and reread the thousands of pages of written work that are produced every month in every composition class, without danger to his health or his sanity? The only solution that has been thus far prepared is the multiplication of teachers to the point where the burden is proportioned to the teacher's strength; and that method, I fear, will have its bad quarter of an hour when it comes before the financial committee of any school board. For my part, although I see no other way out, I have always cherished the hope that some ingenious mind would, sooner or later, devise a more economical scheme. That this is possible seems to be implied in the experience of those who are trained in newspaper offices. A young man enters the

¹Reported from the discussions at the December meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English.

newspaper office as a "cub" reporter. He knows next to nothing about punctuation or grammar, his spelling is reckless, his sentences are amorphous, his ideas about diction mostly wrong; and yet within three or four weeks after he begins his newspaper work these faults will disappear. His writing, if not graceful, will be clear, simple, and correct, and no one will have the slightest difficulty in understanding it. In other words, what the school has labored for three or four years to accomplish and has not accomplished, the newspaper office accomplishes in three weeks.

One of the reasons for the effectiveness of the newspaper training is, of course, apparent to everyone. It is that the theme correction that goes on in the newspaper office is merciless and decisive. The young reporter cannot make the same mistake twice. He either learns and conforms, or he gets out. But other influences must be taken into account—the sense of loyalty to the paper, the satisfaction of being an effective part of a powerful institution, the atmosphere of work in the office, the daily contact with men who are straining every fiber to accomplish well their appointed task; above all, the sense that what one writes will be read by thousands of persons and will in some measure go to shape their thoughts and lives. These things are powerfully stimulating. If we could bring just a fraction of this stimulus to bear upon our students when they write, the problem of theme-correcting would be immensely simplified.

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PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

October 22, 1911

DEAR SIR:

Your circular concerning high-school English has been forwarded to me from the University of Maine. I am deeply interested in these questions and have been studying them for thirty years. Five years ago I shifted my point of attack from the special subject of English to the broader topic of education, since eight years of service as English inspector for the regents of New York had convinced me that radical difficulties in my way lay outside the classroom. For five years I have studied education in this and other countries and have reached certain conclusions that must modify greatly any answers that I would give to your questions.